

8 Mermaids in Brazil

The (ongoing) creolisation of the water goddesses *Oxum* and *Iemanjá*

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Introduction

Mermaids symbolise the ultimate ‘other’ (Kramer 1987: 213), like humans but not human, like fish but not fish, living in rivers, lakes, waterfalls, springs and in particular the sea. They are usually described as beautiful women who bewitch men into following them into the water and to death. With their beauty and wealth they attract envy and lead people into ruin. Eternalised in many fairytales there is, however, another side to the story of mermaids. During the colonial period in Africa mermaids became associated with Europeans due to their light skin, long straight hair, their wealth and their Otherness (Kramer 1987: 221). Shortly after, in West Africa, they were used to represent local water goddesses who developed into one pan-African deity named *Mami Wata* (also written *Mammywater* or *MamiWata*).¹

I came across the mermaid as representation of a water goddess during my recent research in Brazil, though not under the name *Mami Wata*. People refer to the water goddesses under their local names, *Iemanjá* and *Oxum*, two deities in the pantheon of the Afro-Brazilian religion Candomblé.² Nonetheless, the representation of not only one but two water deities as mermaids in Brazil opens the door to an interesting development corresponding to the decline of ethnic differences between the various local variations of Candomblé within an urban context. We may even observe here the beginning of a new creolisation process that can lead, as is the case for the African *Mami Wata*, to an emergent pan-Brazilian deity. In this chapter I will investigate whether Alex van Stipriaan’s interpretation of *Mami Wata* as ‘the creolized symbol of the “other”, presenting solutions where the familiar traditional gods no longer suffice’ (2002: 95) can be applied to the Brazilian context or whether the usage of a mermaid as a symbol for the water goddess is just ‘old wine in new skin’ (Egonwa 2008). I will look at the potential of a creolised symbol for the transformation of the (local) Afro-Brazilian religions into a unified belief system located within the Brazilian metropolises. Following van Stipriaan’s work on the *Watramama* in Surinam, I will further discuss the implication of this transformation from local goddesses into an urban, supra-local deity, a symbol of modernity and globalisation, for Brazil and the Afro-Brazilian religions.

Representation of the African water goddess as mermaid

The core area of *Mami Wata* is the region from Cameroon to Ghana but she is known in many other countries. In a much standardised way she is portrayed as a mermaid with long straight hair and a light skin (generally non-African features – see also Bernard, this volume). Kathleen O'Brian Wicker describes the *Mami Wata* cult as a 'complex transcultural phenomenon composed of elements from widely disparate places and traditions' (2005: 5629). Though I am not interested in extracting the 'authentic' roots of a cultural phenomenon (Hackett 2008: 406), it is important to stress the diversity of the roots of the *Mami Wata* representation because it will be significant later in the discussion of the Brazilian case.³

Scholars trace the arrival of European images of mermaids in West Africa back to figureheads on Dutch and other European ships in the pre-colonial era. Early European travellers have been associated with the sea and marine spirits from the fifteenth century onwards and, as a consequence, Africans added 'to their ancient pantheons of water deities a spirit that has come to be known as MamiWata' (Drewal 2002: 193). The earliest documented example of a mermaid is an Afro-Portuguese ivory from Sherbo, Sierra Leone that was brought to Europe in 1743 (Drewal 1988: 103; Kramer 1987: 222). Early in the nineteenth century marine figures became part of water divinity altars, and mermaid-figures developed into a common representation of local water deities (Wicker 2005: 5630). Despite these early usages of the mermaid for local water goddesses, the name *Mami Wata* was probably unknown in Africa before the twentieth century but developed in the Americas. Kramer (1987: 222) mentions early references to the name of *Mami Wata* (as *Waturmamma* or *Watramamma*) in Surinam and Haiti in the mid-eighteenth century, from where the name, together with some iconographic elements, was brought to West Africa via freed slaves (Kramer 1987) or by African sailors (Wicker 2005: 5630). Another author (Wendl 1991) points to the importance of the Kru (an ethnic group in today's Liberia) for the spread of a relatively standardised representation and cult of *Mami Wata* in West Africa. Wendl (1991: 113–116) argues that the Kru became intermediaries for European traders along the coast and initiated the *Mami Wata* cult wherever they went.

Another reason for the creation of a pan-African *Mami Wata* cult, with relatively homogenised iconography and myths, can be traced back to the influence of European images in West and Central Africa. Scholars refer in particular to an early German chromolithograph of a female Indian snake-charmer who performed in the Carl Hagenbeck show in Europe. Posters of the snake-charmer appeared in Africa early in the twentieth century, where it became regarded as a picture of *Mami Wata* (Drewal 1988: 114). Later, large quantities of posters of the snake-charmer were produced in India where the image of the snake-charmer – with more distinctly Asian features – merged with images of Hindu gods. However, any relative standardisation of *Mami Wata* imagery does not mean that *Mami Wata* is a monolithic cult (see

Hunter-Hindrew 2008). The relatively homogenised way of describing and speaking about *Mami Wata* only reflects the popularity of the mermaid goddess. Drewal (1988: 96), who traces the influence of the poster in forty-one cultures in fourteen African countries, gives the following explanation for the popularity:

Africans determined that there was a direct connection between these Indian images, the beliefs associated with them, and Indians' success in financial matters, just as mermaids and other European icons such as marine sculptures and saints' statues have been linked with wealth and power.

(Drewal 1988: 118)

However, despite the mixture of African, European and Asian elements⁴ and the Pidgin name, *Mami Wata* is not a Pidgin phenomenon but an African one, as Drewal (1988: 102) insists. *Mami Wata* has developed into a pan-African water goddess through a process of 'active interpretation, adaptation, and re-creation, not reproduction' (Drewal, quoted in van Stipriaan 2002: 94). Today, *Mami Wata* is well known, even in the West African popular press and tabloids (Bastian 1998: 21). While she still represents local water deities, she has become a popular icon with a special group of artists, the *watistes*, who produce figures and paintings for their clients. One of these artists, Chéri Samba, who has become very successful in the world of international art, warns in many of his paintings against the temptations of *Mami Wata* (van Stipriaan 2002: 96). *Mami Wata* is nowadays often regarded with suspicion, as dangerous, or, as Meyer writes, with regard to Southern Ghanaian Christians, one of the fallen angels who had been driven out of heaven together with Satan (Meyer 2008: 385). As van Stipriaan states, *Mami Wata* embodies all aspects of modernity, both negative and positive:

She can be unpredictable and aggressive as urban life itself, she can make people rich, or drop them like a hot potato, she relates to individuals rather than the community and her insistence on unconditional loyalty from adherents is interpreted by some as a signal for new rules of sexual contact.

(van Stipriaan 2002: 95)

Mermaids in Brazil

Brazil is the home of several religions derived from African traditions. However, despite the existence of water deities in the pantheon of all Afro-Brazilian religions (or perhaps because of it⁵), there is no pan-Brazil water deity comparable with the *Mami Wata* cult in West Africa. The term *Mami Wata* is also unknown in Brazil. The standardisation process that established the pan-African *Mami Wata* has not taken place in Brazil, nor in other areas of America, as van Stipriaan comments. 'Unlike their West-African sister, the

Afro-Caribbean water mothers seem to have stopped creolization a long time ago and, therefore, might now even be in a state of de-creolization' (van Stipriaan 2003: 327). He argues that the African *Mami Wata* cult flourishes in the post-colonial era of mass communication and increasing mobility and can be seen as a result of psychological and cultural chaos and socio-economic transitions. The American water deities on the other side of the Atlantic 'creolized and gained momentum during the traumatic experiences of slavery when mobility within (let alone between) these slave societies was limited as much as possible. Intra-African creolization, therefore, was confined to the (insular) borders of these individual colonies' (van Stipriaan 2003: 331). Due to limited means of communication, even within the Portuguese colony, Brazil has seen the development of various Afro-Brazilian religions in different locations connected to slavery, all of them the result of a similar creolisation process, but they failed to establish a nationwide system.

Candomblé, today the most well-known Afro-Brazilian religion, is constructed around a pantheon of *orixás*,⁶ among them the water goddess *Iemanjá*, who is regarded by some as the mother of all other *orixás* (Silva 2005: 78). *Iemanjá* is derived from the West African Yoruba deity *Yemaya*⁷, the goddess of the river Niger. However, in Brazil she occupies the place of *Olocum*, the *orixá* of the sea in Nigeria (Prandi 1991: 130). The transformation from a river goddess to the central salt-water goddess has also entered the mythology. According to legends, *Iemanjá* had to run away from her husband: she left the river and disembarked into the sea where she lived together with her mother *Okun* (= *Olocum*). In Brazil she then became associated with marine spirits and other indigenous water spirits (Silva 2005: 78). Today she is regarded as the goddess of all waters and is especially connected to the Atlantic Ocean. Like the other *orixás* in America, *Iemanjá* also has a Catholic correspondent – in her case *Nossa Senhora* ('Virgin Mary') in different local variations. In Bahia the day of *Iemanjá* is celebrated on the second of February, the day of *Nossa Senhora dos Neveantes e das Candeias*, while in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo the festival is celebrated on the eighth of December, the day of *Nossa Senhora da Conceição*. Another important day that is marked with a special ceremony for *Iemanjá* is New Year's Eve. A growing number of people celebrate the New Year with offerings to her at the beach, whether it is in Salvador, in Rio de Janeiro or other places on the Atlantic coast, and also at lakes and rivers in the interior of Brazil. At each place thousands of adherents bring flowers, perfume and other offerings and put them into the water in order to pray for a good new year (Silva 2005: 79).⁸

Iemanjá's transformation from freshwater to salt-water goddess in America might explain the representation of *Iemanjá* as mermaid, popular in particular in Salvador da Bahia in the northeast of Brazil. Salvador is described as the city of *Iemanjá* and many paintings by popular Bahian artists show her as a mermaid, protecting sailors and fishermen. During my recent visit to Salvador I took a photograph of a large statue of *Iemanjá* as a mermaid in front of a house of local fishermen in Salvador, the *Casa de Yemanya*. The mermaid has

flowers and the insignia of *Iemanjá* in her hands and is portrayed with long straight hair and light skin. The usual popular representation of *Iemanjá* in Brazil is a woman with long black hair and a blue dress. She is often accompanied by marine animals such as fishes, dolphins or sea-horses. Similar, smaller statues can be bought in little shops all over Brazil that sell paraphernalia to the adherents of Afro-Brazilian religions, including statues of *orixás*, *Umbanda* spirits and *caboclos*,⁹ necklaces in various colours, candles, perfumes, even literature about the religious practices. However, *Iemanjá* is not the only water goddess who is represented as a mermaid.

In 2010, while conducting an empirical study on Afro-Brazilian religions in the metropolis of São Paulo, I encountered another mermaid quite unexpectedly. This time she represented *Oxum*, a freshwater goddess. In the Yoruba pantheon in West Africa, *Oxum* is connected to a river of that name as well as to lakes, springs and waterfalls. Similar to *Mami Wata* (Drewal 1988: 104) she is often portrayed with a mirror in her hand or gazing at her reflection in a mirror. Her Catholic correspondent in Brazil is also the Virgin Mary in different variations, in particular *Nossa Senhora da Conceição*, *Nossa Senhora das Candeias*, and *Nossa Senhora Aparecida*, the national patron of Brazil (Silva 2005: 78, 94). The representation of *Oxum* as mermaid was found in a small Candomblé *terreiro* ('house')¹⁰ in São Paulo. The founder of the religious community house is *pai* ('father')¹¹ Francisco, a Candomblé priest (*babalorixá*)¹² who was initiated to Candomblé in Salvador da Bahia but moved to São Paulo soon afterwards. After meeting him on several occasions where he presented to the Afro-Brazilian community in general, he agreed to a further private meeting. For the interview we went to the office where he conducts oracle readings for members of his community and other clients.¹³ On the desk, next to the divination board, I noticed at once the expressive statue of a mermaid in golden colour and decorated with the usual insignia of *Oxum*, the *orixá* of *pai* Francisco. The figure took me by surprise because I did not expect to see *Oxum* as a mermaid. Mermaids are usually connected to a salt-water environment (cf. Bernard, this volume), while as already noted, *Oxum* is a freshwater goddess. *Pai* Francisco was very proud of this beautiful figure and saw no problem in referring to the water goddess *Oxum* as mermaid. As a highly political person he stresses at every possible occasion the African identity as part of Brazil. He demands that the adherents of Afro-Brazilian religions should not only wear African dress during ceremonies but also outside, when shopping in the market or speaking to politicians or representatives of other religions. Only by celebrating African heritage as 'normal' can one overcome the prejudices against Afro-Brazilians (interview on 21 May 2010). However, the pantheon of spirits and deities honoured in his community includes several non-African entities, something that some Candomblé priests reject. *Pai* Francisco argues that as he is Brazilian and lives in Brazil he needs to honour the local spirits of the Brazilian soil (and water), the indigenous spirits. As was customary in the house in Salvador where he became initiated, and to which lineage he therefore belongs, he celebrates once a year a ceremony for *cacique* (term for

the ‘chief’ of an indigenous community) *Pena Branca* (‘White Feather’). I also noticed small shelves on the wall of his office with statues of the national patron of Brazil and other entities, though *Oxum* and *Pena Branca* are the main entities. *Pai* Francisco represents a very Brazilian religious mixture and acknowledges the importance of adaptation and syncretism. However, this attitude is not shared by all adherents of Candomblé.

Soon after my interview with *pai* Francisco I mentioned the mermaid to another devotee of *Oxum* (*filho de Oxum*¹⁴) from a different religious community. He rigorously denied the possibility of representing *Oxum* as a mermaid. Even when I showed him the picture, he dismissed it as wrong. He insisted that mermaid was not an African tradition but a Greek one and should not be used to represent the African goddess *Oxum* (email exchange, June 2010). This son of *Oxum* is a well educated young man who represents a relatively new group of adherents of Afro-Brazilian religions: white, educated and usually urban Brazilians who convert to Afro-Brazilian religions in growing numbers. He belongs to a community in the Candomblé Fon tradition that is regarded as secluded and traditional.

His categorical dismissal is symptomatic of the ongoing debate in Brazil on authenticity and the search for ‘true’ African traditions. Influenced by Pierre Verger (1902–1996) and other intellectualists and scholars (see Sansi 2007), the Bahian version of Candomblé, emphasising the Yoruba tradition, was for a long time in Brazil considered to have represented Africa in its purest essence. However, in recent decades this emphasis has shifted towards the so-called Bantu tradition within Candomblé that was not ‘polluted’ by syncretism with Roman Catholicism during the time of slavery, but remained in secrecy an ‘authentic’ African tradition.¹⁵ This debate about which tradition is more African disregards the evolution of the Afro-Brazilian religions during and after the time of slavery.

When enslaved Africans arrived in Brazil, they continued – despite prohibition – to practise African customs and developed in a relatively unorganised way a *culto africano* (‘African cult’) that can be seen as a creolised form because it combined the traditions of various African ethnic groups. During the nineteenth century *casas de candomblé* (‘candomblé houses’) were established which became the birthplace of the tradition combined today under the term Candomblé (or better Candomblés) in order to honour local variations. The Bahian version of Candomblé emphasises the Nago nation which derived from the Yoruba tradition. Candomblé Jêje derived mainly from the Ewe-Fon tradition and Candomblé Angola or Congo from a group of traditions usually labelled Bantu. Another tradition is called *Xangô*, after the Yoruba deity with the same name, hence it resembles Candomblé Nago. And in addition there is *Tambor de Mina*¹⁶ that has a strong influence from Dahomey (today’s Benin) and many similarities with the Haitian religion Vodou. Reginaldo Prandi categorises the different forms of Candomblé and the other Afro-Brazilian religions as ethnic religions (2005: 13–14). They all developed in certain areas of Brazil: *Tambor de Mina*, for instance, in the state of Maranhão, *Batuque* in

Rio Grande do Sul and in the Amazonian region, *Macumba*¹⁷ in Rio de Janeiro, and *Xangô* in Recife (Harding 2005: 120) – each region with a strong historical link to slavery (e.g. slave markets or large sugar plantations).

After the final abolition of slavery in 1888, the constitution of the new republic in 1889 declared freedom of religion and abolished Roman Catholicism as the official religion of Brazil. However, Afro-Brazilian religions were still persecuted throughout the twentieth century and Catholicism remained the ‘almost official’ religion (Mariano 2001: 145, quoted by Oro 2006a: 9), despite the constitutional separation of state and church. Ari Pedro Oro writes that:

We tend to forget that perhaps the biggest historical victims of religious intolerance, and denial of their religious freedom, have been and continue to be the Afro-Brazilian religions, which together with *kardecism*, throughout decades, have been the target of persecution, given that their ritual practices were seen as acts of fraud, faith healing and charlatanism, either on the part of the press and intellectuals, or on the part of the very Catholic church who, during the '50s, launched a battle against religions which believe in and accept mediums or seers.

(Oro 2006a: 10)

In 1965 it became possible to legalise Afro-Brazilian places of worship by civil registration and for religious communities to apply for tax exempt status as non-profit, charitable institutions (Brown 1986: 3).¹⁸ In particular animal sacrifice, which is an important obligation in all Afro-Brazilian religions and a crucial part of many rituals, was the target of legal prosecution – and is still the target of campaigns against Afro-Brazilian religions, despite all efforts of some outstanding priests and priestesses of Afro-Brazilian religions to increase the visibility and acceptance of their religions. The result is the lack of nationwide institutionalisation, which, as Prandi complains, affects the growth of Afro-Brazilian religions (Prandi 2005: 223–232, quoted in Malandrino 2006: 40). It also supports the persistent identification of Afro-Brazilian traditions with local regions.

However, due to the growing internal migration within Brazil, these local religions migrate, too, especially now that the practice of Afro-Brazilian traditions has been legalised in Brazil. Consequently, one can find different forms of Candomblé in every large city in Brazil. This process increases competition: for membership between different religious houses (*terreiros*), for authority between different priests and priestesses, and about the ‘purest’ African tradition. Pressure is even enforced by the recent spread of a so-called ‘Yoruba tradition’ in Brazil. Initiated by Nigerian immigrants who establish and then lead the communities, it is meant to (re)introduce the ‘correct’ Yoruba tradition and in particular the cult of *ifá*.¹⁹ The consequence of this competition is a growing demarcation between communities and less willingness to cooperate. Even when priests and priestesses attend ceremonies in other *terreiros*, they will always insist, to members of their own community, that

their own way to conduct the rituals is the best, the only effective or the 'true' African way. In this situation the reference to mermaids, which have become part of a globalised popular culture, can be seen as 'not African enough'. However, the 'ordinary' adherent is often 'shopping around' and open-minded to new 'offers' on the market of religious traditions. The result of this increasing mobility is an ongoing interaction between different religious communities and different traditions. In this situation the growing presence of the mermaid can offer familiarity in unfamiliar urban settings and can help people 'to cope with great transitions, and with their sense of being uprooted' (van Stipriaan 2003: 330).

Iemanjá, Oxum and Mami Wata – the birth of one truly 'creole' icon of the twenty-first century?

Comparing the post-colonial *Mami Wata* cult in West Africa with the Caribbean water deities during the Middle Passage and on the slave plantations, van Stipriaan states that

the Mothers of Water helped people to find a new individuality and at the same time created a new 'we' in a context in which most people were 'others', and as a reaction to a dominant culture, be it colonial or a (westernised) global culture.

(van Stipriaan 2003: 330)

However, despite many social and political problems, increasing mobility and mass communication, the Caribbean societies did not develop 'enough common ground' to create a pan-Caribbean water goddess. The situation was similar in Brazil, though recently one can notice important changes.

Brazil is confronted with radical transformations, not only in the social and political sectors but also in the religious. Though the majority of Brazilians (64.6 per cent according to the 2010 national census) still declare their belonging to Roman Catholicism, the number is in decline. The national statistics indicate that a growing number of Brazilians belong to one of the numerous Protestant churches (already 22.2 per cent in 2010 with a rising tendency). Both groups together come to nearly 90 per cent of Brazilians. The remaining 10 per cent are divided between spiritists (2 per cent), adherents of an Afro-Brazilian religion (0.3 per cent), agnostics or atheists (8 per cent), and members of another religion such as Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, or Buddhism (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística 2012). These numbers do not cover all adherents of Afro-Brazilian religions because many still avoid being identified with an Afro-Brazilian tradition. Often they will claim to be Roman Catholic or even atheist instead of a member of an Afro-Brazilian community. The term spiritism is also used as an umbrella term to avoid discrimination; hence the number of adherents of Afro-Brazilian religions is probably larger. Nonetheless, even if we take spiritism and Afro-Brazilian religions together, only 3 per cent of Brazilians declared practising a religion in this category in 2010.

However, sociologists are more puzzled by the large scale demographic shift from Roman Catholicism to Protestantism and in particular to Pentecostalism, which also affects Afro-Brazilian religions (Engler 2011). While mainstream, mission-related churches have been relatively tolerant of local traditions, the Pentecostal movement does not usually accommodate them. The Brazilian form of Pentecostalism, labelled neo-Pentecostalism by Ricardo Mariano (1999), is even on a crusade against Afro-Brazilian religions, spiritism and related religions. While the relationship between the neo-Pentecostal groups and the Afro-Brazilian religions was never good, it worsened in 1994/1995 when the *Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus* (Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, short form: UCKG) declared a holy war against them. Despite – or perhaps because of – constant attacks against the Afro-Brazilian religions, many people who have practised *Umbanda* join the Pentecostal churches in great numbers, in particular the UCKG which Oro describes as *macumbeiro* or shaped by ‘Macumba’²⁰ (Oro 2006b). The founder of the UCKG, Edir Macedo, was born into a Catholic family but practised *Umbanda* before he converted to the New Life Pentecostal Church in the 1960s. When he founded his own church in 1977, he included in the liturgy elements from the Afro-Brazilian religions but also the demonisation of Afro-Brazilian spiritual entities already developed in the New Life Pentecostal Church. Deliverance of the demons became the core ritual and means for faith healing.

This attitude against the Afro-Brazilian entities is identical to the way Rosalind Hackett (2008) describes the Pentecostal ‘concern’ with the mermaid and other marine spirits in Calabar, Nigeria. Referring to the Mountain of Fire and Miracles church in Akoka, founded and led by a British-trained micro-biologist Dr D. K. Olukoya, Hackett explains that marine spirits, and in particular mermaids with their half fish, half human form, are regarded as the most potent, and more dangerous than the earth spirits (the ancestors). Marine spirits seduce people with luxurious items (clothes, jewellery) and expensive habits (such as eating out and dancing), and cause problems such as promiscuity and polygamy. One can even become polluted by a parent or partner worshipping water deities.

As I was told in hushed tones by one deliverance specialist, so sophisticated are some of these newer ‘manifestations’ of MamiWata as virtuous church virgins, that they can manipulate through their charismatic charms not just the bodies but also the *minds* of men. He added that this type of spirit is the most dangerous and deceitful, and attacks pastors only.

(Hackett 2008: 410–411)

The Brazilian crusade does not focus on marine spirits alone, as one can see similar tendencies regarding female spirits and women. *Exu* is considered in Candomblé as the messenger between humans and the *orixás* and must be honoured at the beginning of every ritual, in order to gain access to the world of the *orixás*. The Roman Catholic Church, however, associated him early on

with the devil. This correspondence was then carried on into *Umbanda*, which has developed a range of different *Exus* as well as a female counterpart, *Pombagira*, who has now become a special target of the UCKG. This focus on female entities (though not exclusively) did not even stop at the national patron of Brazil. In 1996 a pastor of the UCKG kicked the statue of *Nossa Senhora Aparecida* during a service that was broadcast on TV. Though this 'kicking the saint' incident hit back and forced the UCKG, including Macedo, to apologise for this behaviour in public (Almeida 2003: 321; Birman and Lehmann 1999: 150), it shows how deep the aggression against female deities runs in the UCKG. Considering that *Nossa Senhora Aparecida* is regarded as the Catholic representation of the water goddess *Oxum*, we have here another attack against an important water *orixá*.

Nonetheless, does being a target of vicious attacks support the creation of a 'creole icon' as I suggested above? On one side there are well organised and growing Pentecostal institutions that demonise the practices of Afro-Brazilian religions and encourage their members to attack (verbally, symbolically and also sometimes physically) Afro-Brazilian religious communities and adherents wherever possible (see Silva 2007). Due to their political influence they will have an increasing impact on Brazilian society. On the other side we have a still diverse range of Afro-Brazilian religions with two water goddesses, *Iemanjá* and *Oxum*, as part of a larger pantheon of deities derived from African traditions. As I have shown above, there is an older custom of representing *Iemanjá* (who has been transformed during the period of transatlantic slavery into the salt-water goddess) as mermaid, though *Oxum* has similarities with *Mami Wata* too. Nonetheless, representations of *Oxum* as mermaid are not accepted by all adherents. Due to a lack of consistency and institutionalisation, Afro-Brazilian religions fail to attract new members in large numbers and many of their members refuse to acknowledge their faith in public. The result is declining visibility and a lack of political representation of adherents of Afro-Brazilian religions, despite the increasing visibility of Afro-Brazilian culture and identity.²¹

In this situation the water goddess can be a crucial figure. But the question remains whether this symbolises a modern form of the ancient water deities, as noted by Egonwa (2008: 218) about the *Mami Wata* phenomenon in Benin, or whether it is part of a transformation process. In Haiti *Lasirèn*, a *lwa*²² associated with seduction and wealth is portrayed as mermaid and is regarded as 'Ezili of the Waters'. Some see her as sister of the two major female *lwas*, *Ezili Freda* and *Ezili Dantò*. However, due to the difficult economical situation, *Lasirèn* today plays an increasingly important role in the Vodou pantheon. Marilyn Houlberg (2008: 565) states that *Lasirèn* echoes *Mami Wata* 'in her duality, her fierceness, and her modernity' and she even reports a growing application of *Mami Wata* elements to *Lasirèn*, though Houlberg interprets this development as recycling of elements of American popular culture into Haitian water spirits (2008: 567). In this situation Egonwa's interpretation of 'old wine in new skin' seems to be appropriate for describing the recent adaptation of *Mami Wata* elements in Haiti.

However, Brazil is in a different situation. Though American popular culture also plays an important role in Brazil, the term *Mami Wata* is still unknown despite an escalating creolisation process. As mentioned, the differences between the local ethnic religions have already started to become blurred in the new environment of the Brazilian metropolis. This development will enforce the creolisation process that 'may also involve an element of unification and innovation featuring the explicit airing of ethnic-cultural differences in rituals' (van Stipriaan 2002: 92). *Orixás* will lose some of their local distinctive identity and acquire new roles, similar to the developments in Surinam. After being marginalised by mass evangelism, Western education and government policies in the twentieth century, *Watramama* and the Surinamese Winti religion have remerged in Western temples of art and culture, as van Stipriaan highlights. Winti has become reappraised 'as a way of life and a form of spirituality relevant to them [the Afro-Surinamese intelligentsia]' (van Stipriaan 2002: 92). Increasing scholarly interest and the support of specialists such as Afro-Surinamese migrants in the Netherlands have moved *Watramama* from the spectrum of a folk religion (Winti) into 'the upper social echelons in Suriname and the Netherlands' (2002: 92). The same is happening in Brazil where Afro-Brazilian culture – in particular elements of the Bahian Candomblé – has become part of an elite vision of Brazil. The interest shown by the intelligentsia in Afro-Brazilian heritage seems to exaggerate the reality of the marginalised Afro-Brazilian religions. The *orixás* have moved from religious confinement to popular culture and even elite culture, with its museums, art galleries, theatres and literature. One can find sculptures and paintings of *orixás* in the galleries of urban Brazil and even in European and North American museums and art galleries. *Orixás* are now part of the global culture. In particular the water goddesses have the potential to offer an alternative in a globalised world without losing their local identity.

Notes

- 1 The name *Mami Wata* derives from Pidgin English for 'water as mother' and is even used today in francophone countries in Africa.
- 2 Throughout the chapter I will use Brazilian spellings for Brazilian religions and Brazilian deities and names.
- 3 As the focus of this chapter is on Brazil, I will skip over many details though I do not want to create the impression that the development of a *Mami Wata* cult in West Africa was a homogeneous process, quite the opposite. It was the outcome of a long and complex interaction between conflicting and even confusing aspects which fall beyond the scope of the current project.
- 4 Van Stipriaan (2003: 326) mentions that roots might be traced in the Muslim world, too.
- 5 According to Derwal (2008: 3), *Mami Wata* is also absent among the Yoruba. He guesses that the reason for this absence is the existence of an ancient and well-defined pantheon of water goddesses.
- 6 Brazilian term for African deities, derived from the Yoruba language in Nigeria.

- 7 In order to distinguish between the Brazilian deity and the West African one, I have chosen the English spelling for the West African entities and the Portuguese spelling for the Brazilian one.
- 8 Similar ceremonies are even held in Coney Island, New York, though mostly by adherents of the Cuban *orisha* religion.
- 9 Group of indigenous spirits.
- 10 Brazilian term for the house or site of a religious community; used for Candomblé as well as *Umbanda* communities.
- 11 *Pai* is a short form of *pai de santo* (father of the saint), the Brazilian term for a priest, and used in all Afro-Brazilian religions; the female equivalent is *mãe de santo* (mother of the saint). The short forms are used in addressing priests and priestesses as a form of respect.
- 12 Priest of an Afro-Brazilian religion (derived from the West African Yoruba language); the female equivalent is *ialorixá*.
- 13 The Brazilian expression for this divination technique is *jogo de búzios*. It is conducted with small kauri shells (called *cauris* or *búzios*). During the long initiation process the priest or priestess learns how to interpret the way the shells fall on the board.
- 14 Son of *Oxum*: Brazilian expression for someone initiated into the cult of *Oxum*; the female equivalent is *filha de Oxum*, daughter of *Oxum*.
- 15 The same development can be observed in the USA and the Caribbean, particularly among adherents of Afro-Cuban religions. For nearly 100 years the Cuban *orisha*-religion (formerly called *Santería*) was considered the true Afro-Cuban tradition, but recently the Palo Monte religion – with a stronger emphasis on Bantu instead of Yoruba – became praised as ‘more African’ than the *orisha* religion.
- 16 The term *Mina* is a reference to the Portuguese fort São Jorge da Mina in West Africa where many slaves were imprisoned before transported to Brazil (Silva 2005: 83).
- 17 Brown (1986: 2) states that people referred to Afro-Brazilian religious groups using the generic term *Macumba*, with a pejorative designation; even today it is often used with a negative connotation.
- 18 See Winant (1992) for an overview of the changes of race politics that have initiated the *abertura* (the democratic opening towards Afro-Brazilian cultures and religions) in the 1970s.
- 19 *Ifá* is regarded by some as the most sophisticated cult of the Yoruba tradition; priests are traditionally only men though recently it became known that women have been initiated into *ifá*, too. However, the Nigerian priests in Brazil are by and large *babalorixás* and not *ifá*-priests (called *babalows*).
- 20 *Macumba* can be described as a form of *Umbanda*, practised predominately in Rio de Janeiro.
- 21 During the last decade the Brazilian government has successfully improved race relations in Brazilian society: for instance, by supporting black students’ access to higher education, including references to African heritage in school textbooks and establishing cultural centres and museums that present African culture as part of Brazil.
- 22 *Kreyòl* is the term for deities in the Haitian Vodou pantheon. The term *Lasirèn* derives from the French *la sirène* (‘the siren’).

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